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TO KILL A SULTAN - A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE ATTEMPT ON ABDÜLHAMİD II (1905)

*(BİR SULTANI ÖLDÜRMEK -
II. ABDÜLHAMİT'E SUİKAST GİRİŞİMİNİN
ULUSLARARASI TARİHİ (1905))*

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The 1905 Yıldız assassination attempt has been described as “one of the greatest and most sensational political conspiracies of modern times” (p. 30). In each chapter of this book, the subjects regarding the Yıldız attempt are approached from various aspects. The numerous variables, the parties of the attempt’s background, the actualization and aftermath are evaluated together with the developments peculiar to the geographies and the time

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period. It is understood that many of the variables and developments were interrelated. Among these variables and developments were contemporary capitalism, nationalism, socialism, mass media, internationalism, interstate collaboration, humanitarianism, international law, and orientalist beliefs. It is stated that one of this book's objectives is to better understand the intersections between ideology and application, states, and nationalist movements. The authors add their own evaluations to various subjects and refer to the evaluations of others, including those of historians. Moreover, flawed opinions are mentioned and the errors and deficiencies in these common opinions are explained. In the introduction, it is expressed that this book, which analyzes the conspiracy that resulted in the assassination attempt and the subsequent developments in depth, provides a unique opportunity to re-evaluate in which ways the histories of the Ottoman Empire, Europe, and the rest of the World were interrelated and to contemplate on many unanswered questions.

The widespread tradition of revolutionary violence has a long history for the people of Armenia and the Armenian diaspora. To readers who are familiar with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF-Dashnaktsutyun), the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), or the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG), the book may serve as a reminder of this affinity for violent methods. The book indicates that the Armenian revolutionaries were well-aware that previous terror attacks, such as the ARF's terror attack on the Ottoman Bank in 1896, could have led to violent reprisals against ordinary Armenian citizens and even considered reprisals to be beneficial for their cause. A statement which was made by the ARF leader of the attack on the Ottoman Bank, Armen Garo (Karekin Pastermadjian), and reflects the mindset of the ARF is included in the book: "The more the victims, the better it will be for our cause" (p. 28). The first concrete plans for the assassination of Abdülhamid II were prepared during an ARF meeting in 1901. Additionally, it is expressed that as the ARF's plans to create a general uprising in Sasun had to be realized in 1905 at the latest, the Yıldız assassination attempt had to be carried out in 1905 as well. For the ARF, the resolution of the Armenian Question was also based on the success of the Bulgarian revolutionaries.

It is indicated that there was a consensus of opposition against the autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II's regime both domestically and externally. In this regard, an interesting detail was that the Austrian, French and Russian embassies in the Empire received an ARF declaration mailed on the day of the attack. These mails, which covertly expressed the ARF's responsibility in the attack, hardly received attention; Abdülhamid II "had so many enemies inside and outside the Empire, and the attack was so violent, that no one dared to attribute it to an Armenian conspiracy" (p. 53).

One of the focal points of the Yıldız assassination attempt was the Belgian anarchist Edward Joris, who had an interesting and controversial role in the preparation and aftermath of this plot. Joris' character, life in Belgium and İstanbul, inconsistent beliefs and actions, disputable relationship with anarchism and the ARF, arrest and trial are amongst the primary factors that raises the interest of the reader. Joris' meeting with the ARF is described as a two-fold encounter. Firstly, it was the "meeting of European anarchism and Russian-inspired Armenian populism" (p. 44). Secondly, it was the encounter between two types of internationalism. In addition, the author of the chapter expresses that, contrary to popular belief, the ARF was not a nationalist organization, but a synthesis of nationalism and internationalism which also involves a constructivist type of socialism (pp. 44-45).

Contrary to the popular opinion and the exaggerated statements in his own memoirs, it is explained that Joris had a small scale role in the terror plot, such as translating and his ARF co-conspirators using his home as a place to stay, hold meetings, and store explosives. However, Joris wanted a more heroic role and, in time, he cast himself a leading role after the attack and his arrest. This unexpected shift in Joris' role constituted an abrupt twist for the ARF. Additionally, a sudden twist that occurred only months before the Yıldız attack was the deaths of two ARF members in an explosion in Bulgaria, the cause of which is subject to dispute. These deaths had a deep impact on the ARF and Joris as one of the two individuals who died, Christapor Mikaelian, was one of the ARF's founders, and the other, Vramshabouh Kendirian, had become Joris' best friend and was the one who connected Joris to the plot. The death of Kendirian, who was interestingly enough carrying Joris' passport before the explosion, may have played an important role in Joris' radicalization in İstanbul.

As the many aspects of the Yıldız assassination attempt's background and aftermath are analyzed from different aspects, this book may be interesting as well as confusing for the average reader. Furthermore, it is explained to the reader that the information should not be considered as absolute truths, even those that are expressed together with first-hand sources. For instance, right after a reference to one of Joris' letters, the reader is cautioned not to immediately accept views that such sources may create, as it will be demonstrated with Joris' portrayal in the third chapter. Moreover, it is written that the violence-prone statements in one of Joris' letters may be momentary exaggerations and not actual beliefs (pp. 70-71).

How the public of the Ottoman Empire, Belgium, and Europe in general perceived and responded to the attack is another striking aspect in the book. While the public opinions and media organs generally condemned the violence

of the attack, there was widespread consensus on opposition against Abdülhamid II and his way of ruling. On the other hand, there were some parties who argued that this attack was understandable or even necessary. As an example of this case, Tevfik Fikret's poem titled "An Instant of Delay" (Tr. "*Bir Lâhza-i Teahhur/Bir Anlık Gecikme*") is included in the book's epilogue. In the poem, the perpetrator of the terror attack is characterized as a "glorious hunter" (pp. 265-266). Similarly, the *Şura-yı Ümmet* of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in exile were among those who believed that the Yıldız attack symbolized an act of retaliation against the 20 years of Abdülhamid II's rule. According to an oppositional article by the CUP, the bombing was a selfless act aimed to end the bloodshed. An equally surprising for detail for many readers would be that there was a period of cooperation between the CUP and the ARF against Abdülhamid II's regime (p. 257).

One of the authors of the book expresses the importance of understanding the precise contexts of the period and the main points behind the contentions and arguments of Belgium. Economic concerns, Belgium's sentiment of embarrassment and harmed prestige after the arrest of and verdict on Joris, the high number of attempted political assassinations that had taken place in Belgium between 1874 and 1914 were among the main reasons behind the responses of Belgium.

The "Joris affair" represents "the most contentious" case in the relations between the two states, although it was never fundamentally jeopardizing in the long term (p. 129). It also revealed negative Orientalist perceptions and faulty Belgian diplomacy. As the combative interactions continued, the different interpretations of bilateral agreements and the capitulations between the Ottoman Empire and Belgium also led to a diplomatic incident between the two states. This diplomatic incident caused attention to shift from the legitimacy of the Armenian/anarchist terrorism to international law and human rights. Joris was viewed as "a victim of autocracy" by the Belgian and European public opinion (p. 32). This is a case that reminds the readers of how the views and priorities of the parties can vary according to their geopolitical conditions and the context. Interestingly, Joris is presently remembered mostly as a supporter of the Flemish movement and not a co-conspirator of a terror attack.

The European press coverage displayed insufficient interest and a significant degree of bias towards Joris and the Yıldız attack. It reflected and was shaped by European feelings of Western superiority along with Turcophobia, Islamophobia, and racism. Many journalists were convinced that Joris was innocent or had been manipulated, despite of the evidence. Furthermore, even when the terrorist intentions of the ARF became certain, it barely led to attention or comments from the European press. Most journalists avoided

deeper research of the ARF's political motives. On one side, the notoriously autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II fueled the negative prejudice of Belgium and the West against the Ottoman judicial sovereignty. On the other side, important examples of previous assassination attempts in Belgium reflected the unfairness in Belgium's response regarding Joris. In 1900, Belgian Jean-Baptiste Sipido attempted to kill the Prince of Wales in Brussels, but his subsequent acquittal led to problems in the relations with Britain. In 1902, Italian Gennaro Rubino, who tried to kill King Leopold II of Belgium, was sentenced to lifelong forced labor (pp. 143-144). In addition, a British satirical drawing of Abdülhamid II and Leopold II (p. 131) conversing on their impunity published on 31 May 1905 can be considered as a manifestation of the negative perceptions towards the Ottoman Empire and as a reminder that autocracy did not pertain only to the Eastern World.

An author explains that the Joris affair has historical value as it exemplifies and exposes the "power hierarchies and ideologies that were responsible for the preservation of unequal treaty laws, but also the extent and implications of Western extraterritoriality" (p. 160). Such phenomena continue one way or another in today's world. Presently, the US, using its superpower status, has been claiming extra-territorial powers and disregarding international law, which has been widely criticized.

This book can be an interesting read and raise curiosity for various topics. It may feel like a historical, crime, or political intrigue novel. The reader will have an idea on the inner workings of a terror organization, how terror activities influence interstate relations, and international law in various aspects, how the perceptions towards terrorism can vary with different parties and conditions. When considering its overall presence in the book, the reader may think that the ARF has a secondary place in comparison to the subjects of Joris and Belgium, Abdülhamid II's regime, and the West's responses to the attack. This can be regarded as a reflection of the reality of that period, in which the plot's primary perpetrator was not paid sufficient attention.

Lastly, the book makes several references to the genocide thesis concerning the Armenians (pp. 260-262, 269). It should be kept in mind that the downplayed perpetrator of the Yıldız attack, the ARF, with its revolutionary violence and agitation, consciously played a key role in the breakdown of the relations between the Ottoman Empire and its Armenian subjects. In other words, the excesses of the ARF are an integral part of the chain of events that led to the Ottoman government's decision to enact the Armenian Relocation and Resettlement in 1915-16 and the turmoil that ensued.